

"Now, there's the Princes," continued his visitor. "That Prince woman is a regular nagger. She was telling Mrs. Bates, her sister, only yesterday, that if ever the chance came again she would never marry a man who smoked. She said tobacco was worse than liquor."

John Curtice listened in pained silence.

"And the Howards don't get along together at all," continued Miss Bennett. "Nor do the Rangers. But, as I was saying, nobody can blame you." She left him, well satisfied with her morning's work by seeing Rev. John Curtice in a condition approaching despair.

Two days later the locum tenens, Mr. Halford, arrived. There was much to be done before the pastor could depart. Mr. Halford was introduced to a number of the parishioners, and was made acquainted with the condition of the various societies.

Then came the debacle, which was to create more excitement in Stapleville than a presidential election or an earthquake, or the fall of the Metropolitan Life tower—if it could fall. Miss Bennett was the retailer of this choice piece of news.

"I heard him with my own ears last night," she told the excited listeners at the Dorcas meeting. "I had gone to his house to ask him whether he had told Mr. Halford about that new altar cloth we were to have next Sunday, but seeing Mr. Halford sitting with Mr. Curtice by the window, I naturally hesitated to go in, being a single woman. And then I heard Mr. Curtice say, in a most solemn voice:

"'Yes, I have deceived everybody. I have lived a lie all these years, but now I can live it no longer, and I am going away to hide my head from these good people whom I have wronged. I have never been ordained a minister. I am an impostor.'"

"Sakes alive, you must have been dreaming, Bessie!" exclaimed Mrs.

Bates. "I met him on his way to the depot this morning, and I never saw a cheerier man or one with the look of a better conscience on his face."

But the excited chatter was interrupted by an unusual circumstance. Two ladies had fainted. One was Mrs. Prince. The other was Martha Dunn.

"Bessie, Bessie!" gasped Mrs. Prince, when at last she had been restored, "can you look me in the face and tell me that?"

"Yes, my dear, it is true — gospel true," answered Miss Bennett, with an inward sense of playing a prophetic role.

"And do you know what it means?" gasped Mrs. Prince.

"No, what?"

"That Jack and I have never been married, that's all." And Martha Dunn, who was in the process of returning to consciousness, promptly fainted again.

The consternation in Stapleville can be better imagined than described. The whole town was buzzing about Mr. Halford's ears. In vain he protested that, to the best of his belief, Mr. Curtice was an ordained clergyman; he told how highly he was esteemed in the diocese. Finally a telegram was sent to the pastor urging him to return at once.

He came on the next train, sensing misfortune. He was met by an excited crowd. They surrounded him, accusing, clamoring; they followed him to his home, and it was only when he laid his proofs of ordination before them that they turned upon Miss Bennett, who had prudently fled as soon as she saw that Mr. Curtice had justified himself.

"You can't think what a relief it has been to us, Mr. Curtice," sobbed Mrs. Prince, clinging to her embarrassed husband. "We've lived a happy married life so long and it seemed so cruel to be told—"

"And James and I," wept Martha Dunn. "After our years of love and mutual sacrifice to have such a